



STILL HERE

NEARLY THREE DECADES AFTER IT OPENED IN NEW YORK'S BATTERY PARK CITY, THIS SMALL SITE CONTINUES TO SPREAD ITS INFLUENCE—AND BRING PEOPLE JOY.

BY JANE MARGOLIES / PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEXI VAN VALKENBURGH



From Mary Miss's home and studio, it's a couple blocks south, then west, to reach Battery Park City, the landmark residential and commercial development built on landfill just off Lower Manhattan. Miss, an artist, is a walker, and when her dog was young and spry, they used to make the trek together regularly, wending their way down to South Cove, the small park along the Hudson River she designed with the landscape architect Susan Child, FASLA, and the architect Stanton Eckstut; it opened in 1988. On any given day, people stroll through the honey locust grove, bask in the sun on benches facing the water, and climb to the top of a lookout tower that resembles the Statue of Liberty's crown, while children clamber over the boulders that separate the upper and lower levels of the site.

Beloved by locals and admired by landscape architects, South Cove, however, remains little known as an entity unto itself—there are no ta-da! gestures marking its boundaries, no signs with glittering letters differentiating it from the other waterfront areas in Battery Park City, which flow from one to the next. But it deserves wider recognition.

ABOVE

The landfill area—still mostly undeveloped when this photograph was taken—added 92 acres in the Hudson River just off Lower Manhattan.

LEFT

South Cove is the smaller of two coves that were part of Battery Park City's 1979 design.

COOPER ROBERTSON, LEFT; COURTESY PERKINS EASTMAN, RIGHT



ABOVE

The pilings in the river are grouped to mirror the form of the planting and boulder edge.

TOP RIGHT

Amanda Burden, then vice president for planning and design of the Battery Park City Authority, with Mary Miss; Douglas Reed, FASLA; and Susan Child, FASLA.



Today much of New York's waterfront has been developed with attractive and popular parks and public spaces like this one. But South Cove—conceived at a time when the shoreline was a no-man's-land, cut off from the rest of the city by roadways and railroad tracks, and dotted with derelict warehouses—helped spark New York's rediscovery of its waterfront. It gave those who lived and worked in Manhattan a toehold on the river. It pioneered technical innovations and design features that influenced the development of parks and waterfront spaces up and down the Hudson and indeed all around New York.

And it also boosted the careers of its creators. Child, whose Boston-based firm, Child Associates, was not well known before her work on South Cove, would go on to other high-profile projects such as restoration of the gardens at Edith Wharton's The Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts. Eckstut has worked on large-scale projects all over the world and is today senior principal at the New York-based Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects, a division of Perkins Eastman. For Miss, the project was an early chance to step out into the public realm, whetting her appetite for installations that served a

civic purpose—something she has continued to pursue with the nonprofit she founded, City as Living Laboratory.

"To work on something on this scale—something permanent that would affect the lives of New Yorkers—that was an amazing experience," she says.

The three of them had never worked together before the Battery Park City Authority's ambitious Fine Arts Program assigned them to the site, located at the southern terminus of South End Avenue. "It was a shotgun wedding," says Eckstut. The arts program sought to redefine the role of the artist in the creation of public spaces, involving them from the outset in the design of the spaces, rather than merely commissioning them to add a piece of sculpture after the spaces were developed. Each member of the team brought essential expertise and a unique point of view to the project.

Eckstut was the ultimate insider. He and the architect Alex Cooper, then his partner in Cooper Eckstut Associates, had drawn up the 1979 master plan for Battery Park City, which set aside an extraordinarily generous third of the total 92 acres for public space. He'd also worked with the landscape architects



Hanna/Olin on the design of Battery Park City's waterfront Esplanade, which opened in 1986 and serves as the backbone of the development. Eckstut knew Battery Park City's backstory (the proposal to build a new town in town was first put forth in the early 1960s, the project came under state control in 1968—and then nearly tanked during New York City's fiscal crisis of the 1970s). He saw the big picture. Above all, he wanted to make sure South Cove would be successfully stitched together with the rest of the development.

Child was the plants person in the group. And she was, indeed, "a genius with plants," says the landscape architect Anita Berrizbeitia, ASLA, a professor and the chair of the department of landscape architecture at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design (GSD). Berrizbeitia, who worked for Child for several years, says admiringly, "Out of four plants she could make a work of art."

But Child brought considerably more than horticultural expertise to the project. A strong conceptual designer, she'd come to the field of landscape architecture late in life, after studying art history

at Vassar College, marrying, and raising a family. She was already in her 40s when she planted an immense vegetable garden edged with flowers and crisscrossed with walking paths at her waterfront house in Westport, Massachusetts—after which her interest in landscape design took off. She got a certificate in landscape and environmental design from the Radcliffe Institute and worked for the City of Boston in a program that converted empty lots into community gardens, before returning to school to get an MLA from Harvard's GSD. She and the landscape architect Peter Hornbeck formed a firm that evolved into Child Associates, and Doug Reed, FASLA, joined the staff, becoming project manager for South Cove and, eventually, a principal. Although their firm was not a local outfit, they came to the attention of the Fine Arts Program's selection committee, and Child and Reed "went all out" in submitting their qualifications for the job, recalls Reed, who later cofounded Reed Hilderbrand.

For her part, Miss brought vision—and glamour—to the group. Just prior to the South Cove project, the artist, a native of New York, had completed a

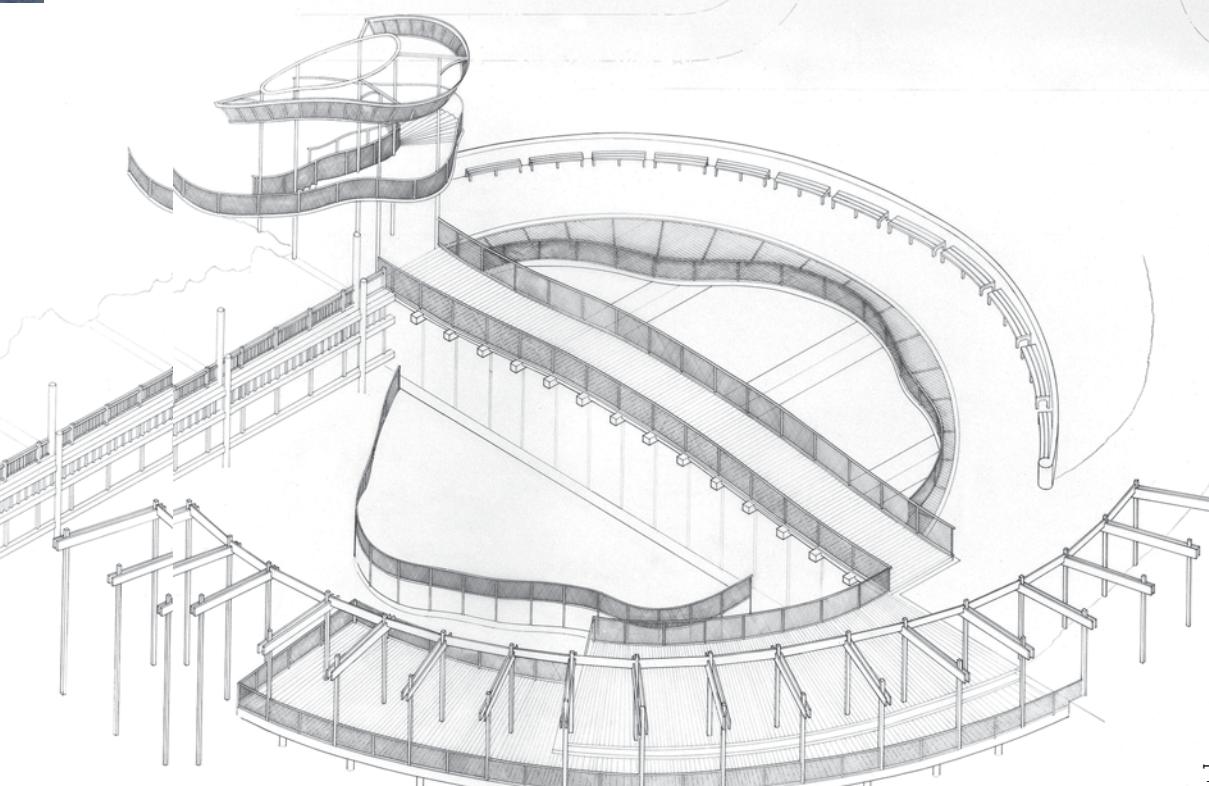
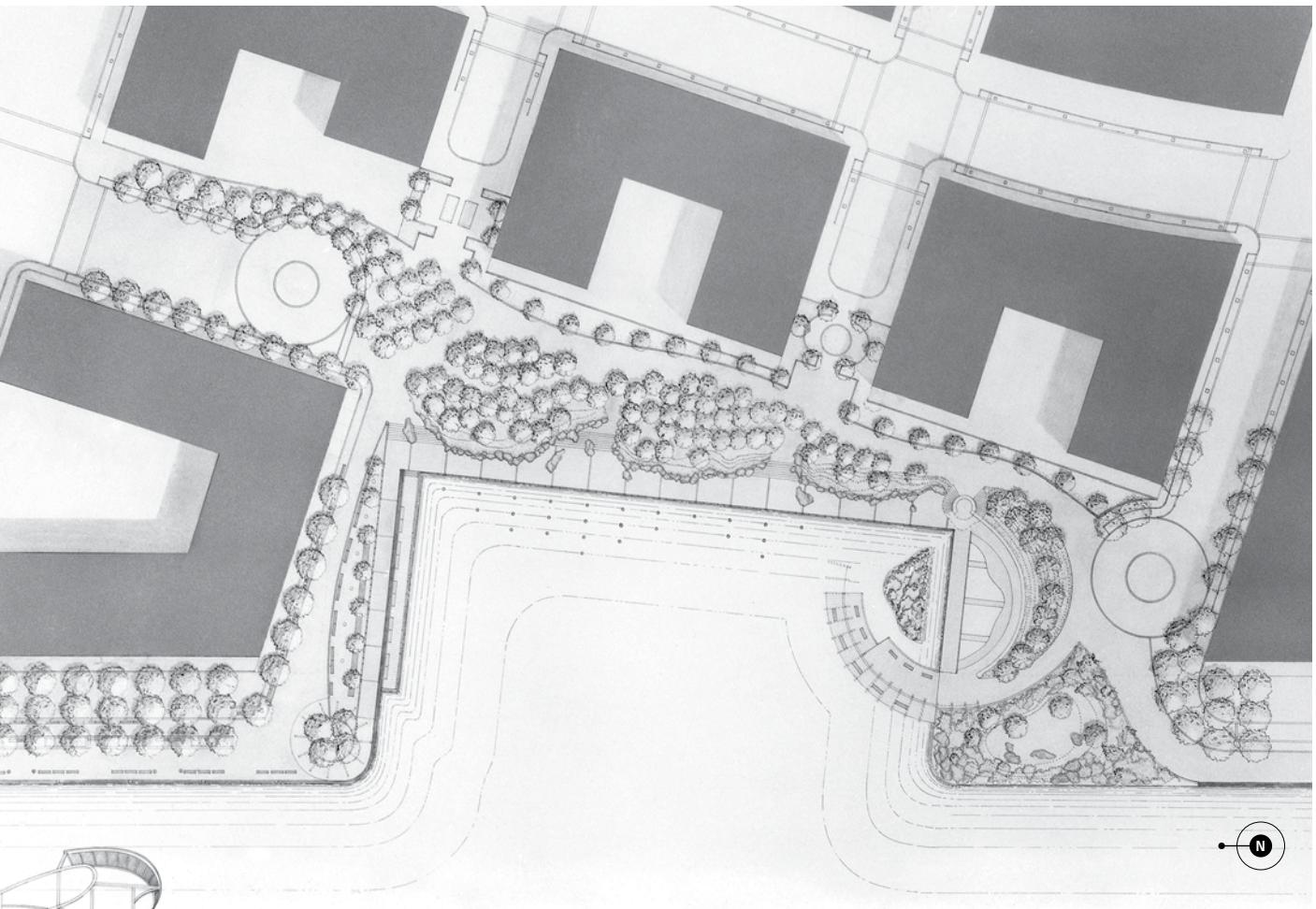
ABOVE

The design bridges water and land with pilings that lead to a wooden edge, then to boulders and plantings that step up the site.

OPPOSITE

Drawings by Mary Miss show circular forms and undulating edges that soften the rectilinear form of the cove.

MARY MISS



work that received considerable press coverage titled *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys*, consisting of five installations spread over four acres at the Nassau County Museum on Long Island. It involved a square pit cut into a field that people climbed down into. "I was interested in engaging people in the experience of a place," she says.

With South Cove, Miss's goal was to engage people with the river. She had lived just a couple blocks from the Hudson since the late 1960s but had always felt frustrated that she wasn't able to get close to the water. The elevated esplanade provided a spectacular vantage point for looking out at the water; for South Cove, she wanted to get people right down next to the water, and out onto it—so they could "see it, feel it, smell it," she says. If they got splashed at high tide, all the better.

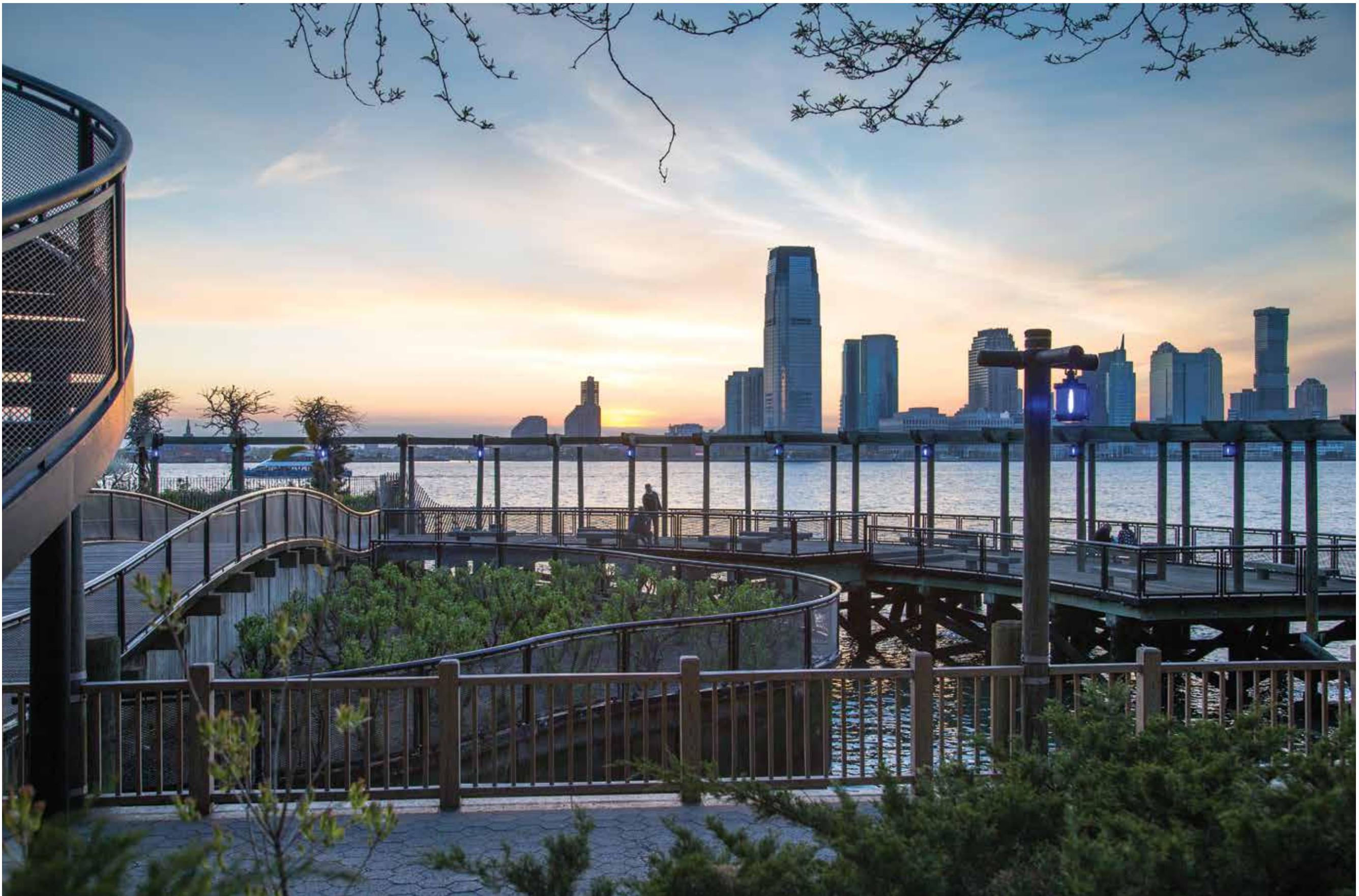
The site to which the trio was assigned already had the rough outlines of a cove from the master plan—south of the esplanade, the landfill edge cut inland, then continued in a straight line south

RIGHT
The urban coastline of New Jersey can be seen across the Hudson.

before jutting out into the water again. The apartment buildings to the east of the site had yet to be built; south of it there was no development whatsoever at the time—just barren landfill down to historic Battery Park. Miss, Child, and Eckstut's site was essentially a blank slate.

The landfill material—much of it taken from the excavation of the nearby World Trade Center site—was laid on a relieving platform that allowed river water to flow underneath it. The fact that they would not be building on solid ground but on a structure cantilevered over the Hudson forced the designers to carefully consider the weight of anything added to the site. Child and Reed experimented with blocks of structural foam, and they carefully calibrated the soil mix (by the soil scientist Philip Cral) laid on top—techniques used all the time today that were pioneered at South Cove.

Although the engineered structure of the platform presented challenges to the landscape architects, the artifice of it all was intriguing to Miss. She became interested in “how to reveal the fake infrastructure that was supporting the fake land.” Beginning in 1985 there were marathon planning sessions over a four-month design period, during which everyone batted around ideas. Then they'd split up and do research on their own. Child and Reed threw themselves into learning how coves in the Northeast are created by natural forces and the characteristic forms they contain. “We came to meetings with reams of research on native plant communities, on the topography of dunes, the geology of the Manhattan coastline, on other parks that focused on a particular river character,” Reed recalls—research that helped inform South Cove’s rock ledge and combination of native grasses and shrubs. In time, South Cove’s design began to jell and, eventually, take form; the park opened in the summer of 1988 at a cost of \$10 million.





Critics raved. *New York* magazine's Kay Larson called South Cove "the most environmentally sensitive major sculptural enterprise that New York City has been offered." Tony Hiss, rhapsodizing in the *New York Times*, wrote that South Cove "works to 're-place' New York...as a river town." For ordinary New Yorkers, there was the sheer wonder—the awe!—of what Miss had been dreaming about for so long: the experience of being by the water. I could see it on everyone's faces when I flipped through slides in the Battery Park City Authority's archives, made from photographs taken when the park was new.

As Battery Park City filled in with buildings and other public spaces, and in the years since, there have been changes to the site—some for the better, and some, in the eyes of the designers, for the worse. Yet South Cove has maintained its integrity as an urban landscape; it is a space that unfolds as you move through it, as I did several times recently, inviting Miss along on one occasion and Eckstut on another. Child, now 87 and a resident of an assisted living facility in Connecticut, last visited South Cove in 2013 and spoke with me by phone.

ABOVE
Honey locust trees appear random but are placed on a grid, each centered on a structural column that supports the relieving platform.

OPPOSITE
The jetty's pergola extends into the river.



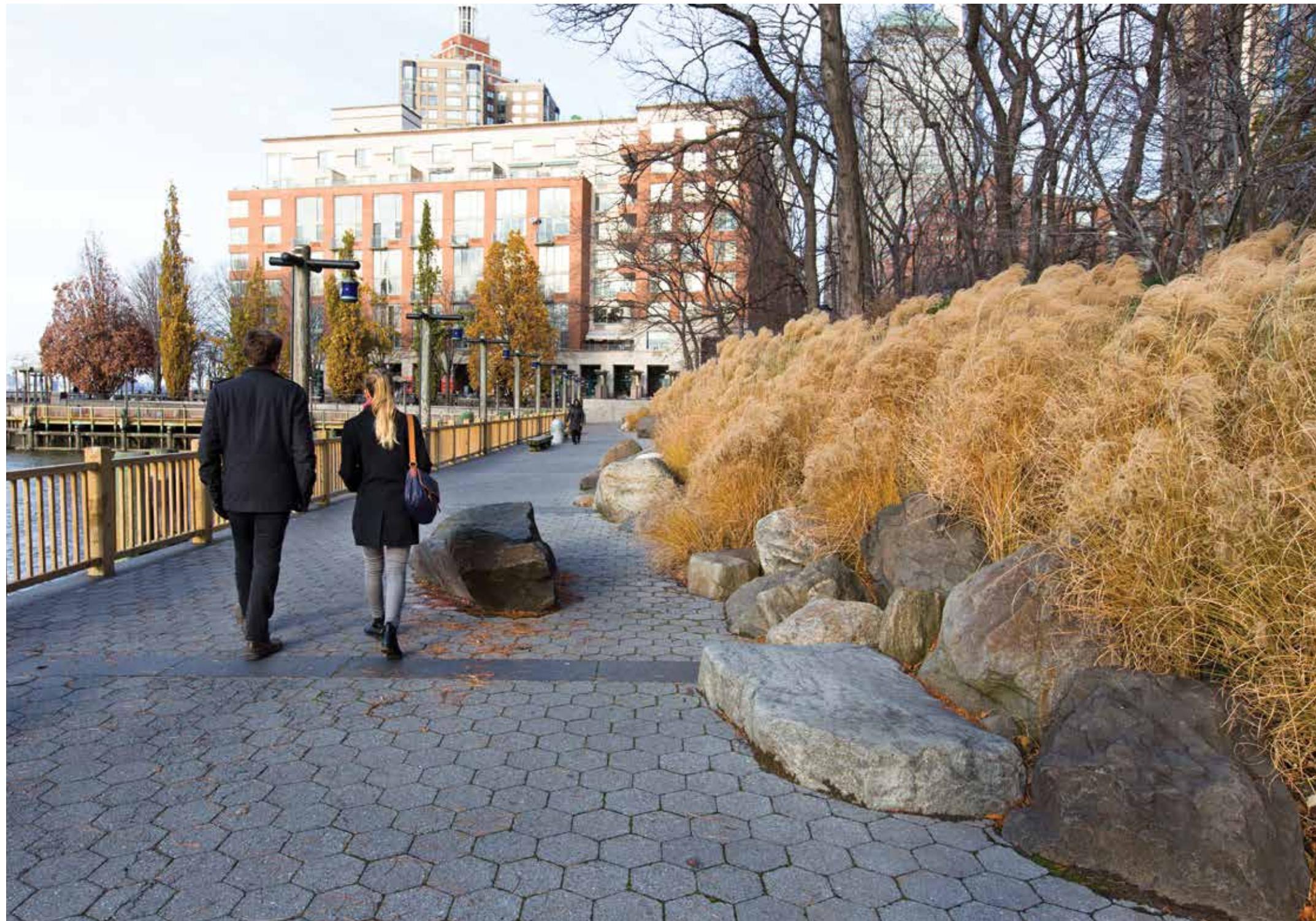
The designers intended the site as a deliberate break from the formality of the esplanade, and South Cove's northern side is a transitional zone. Like the esplanade, it's linear and tree-lined (silver linden on one side, English oak on the other). But its surface, covered with the same hexagonal granite pavers used on the esplanade, slopes down, taking you from the open, expansive esplanade to the more enclosed and varied experience of South Cove.

At the corner, where you begin to head south again, you can walk out onto a pier tucked low along the cove's northern edge. Benches face south, toward the cove and the Statue of Liberty beyond. There are pilings poking up from the water that were deliberately placed to evoke the deteriorating piers all along the Hudson, a consequence of the decline in water travel as well as the migration of commercial shipping to other parts of the harbor. The pilings lead your eye from the water to the land and back again.

Along the longest side of the cove, you can hug the water—or veer slightly inland to the grove. Here, the multistem honey locust trees offer welcome intimacy and shade next to the vast expanse of the water. "We had to fully canopy the place;

otherwise the river would eat it up," Reed explains. The multistem trunks maximize the woodsy feel while maintaining minimal footprints. Scrutinize the trees from a certain angle and you'll realize they're planted on a grid—each centered on one of the platform's supporting columns. Because of the trees' slender trunks they don't create a visual barrier, and they sway in the wind. Narrow pathways weave throughout. Midday, the movable wooden benches scattered about are occupied by office workers escaping their cubicles; at night, couples settle in. (The grove has a reputation as a prime spot to get engaged.)

The woods are separated from the lower level of the site by massive boulders interspersed with granite steps. The boulders were carefully placed to create the look of "rocks that had washed up on the shore," says Child. A few spill onto the waterside walkway, as if they tumbled there themselves. As the boulders were placed, the landscape architects became aware of the spaces between the rocks; they plugged those areas with soil and planted beachgrass, wild roses, and winterberry. "It was an exciting moment," Reed recalls. Those interstitial plantings brought "the coastal plantings into the coastal rock edge and integrated the two."



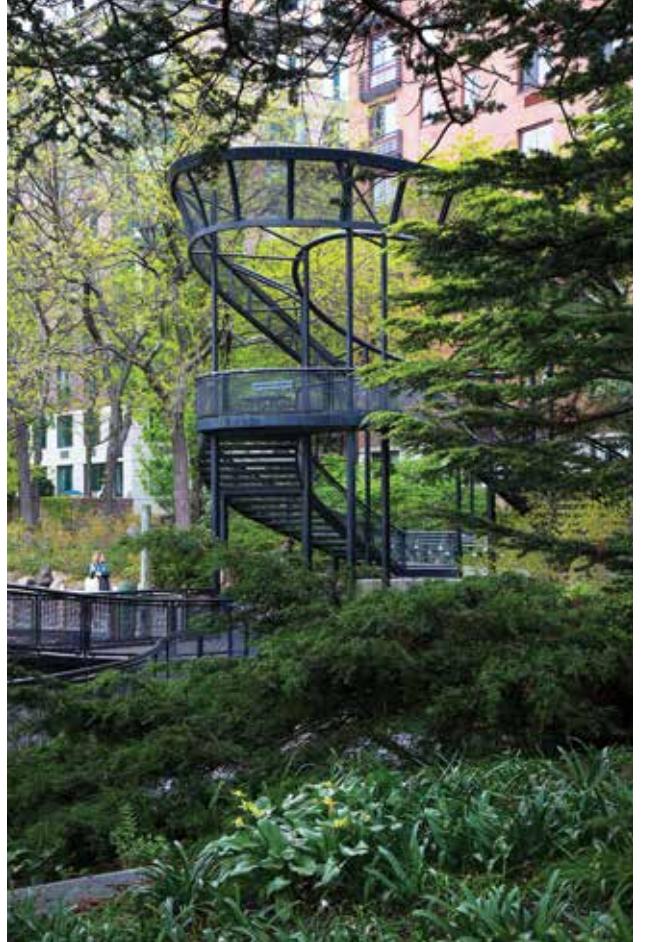
BELOW AND LEFT
Lanterns are by
the lighting designer
Howard Brandston;
the pergola is a
structural form that
does not block the view.

OPPOSITE
Grasses were chosen to
evoke the plants found
in natural coastal areas.

Toward the southern end of South Cove is the tower and jetty complex, which forms a circle and serves as the anchor of the site. Eckstut and Miss designed the lookout, with its multiple curves of black steel. For the architect, it was the fulfillment of his desire for a marker at the termination of South End Avenue. Miss's preoccupation was with the undulating form of the scaffolding that encased the Statue of Liberty, then under restoration. She tried and tried to draw the complex structure that she envisioned, but in the end it was Eckstut who sketched out the design late one night, he says, with bowed staircases on either side of the tower leading to a platform surrounded by a crown-like top. From the platform, the Statue of Liberty was in full view when South Cove was completed.

Near the tower, a wooden bridge leaves the shore and arches over an island. To one side the island is a squiggly, somewhat semicircular form, originally planted with beachgrasses. According to Eric T. Fleisher, the director of horticulture for the Battery Park City Parks Conservancy, the tall, dry ends of the grasses proved too tempting for pranksters who repeatedly set fire to the island. Sea buckthorn replaced the grasses for a time, but never did well. Now the bed is planted with baccharis, which can withstand the increasingly frequent flooding of the area as a result of the rising river levels associated with climate change.

To the other side of the bridge is a framework mirroring the planting bed's form. But here the relieving platform has been cut away, exposing not



"I WANTED TO REVEAL THE ARTIFICE OF THE TERRAIN YOU'RE STANDING ON."

—MARY MISS

only the river water—dark and ever-moving and slapping against the framework—but the concrete beams that support the platform. "I wanted to reveal the understructure of the platform—the artifice of the terrain you're standing on," Miss explains.

The bridge leads you to a curved jetty, topped by a pergola, that spirals almost back to the shore, providing a spot to look out at the water but also back at the land. Attached to posts along the wooden shoreline railing are marine-style lanterns—a nod to New York's maritime past—by the lighting designer Howard Brandston, who happens to be a sailor. At night the cove's edge glows with the blue lights, whose reflections dance on the water. (So successful are the fixtures that they've inspired the installation of blue lights along park areas farther up the Hudson.)

Just south of the tower and jetty is a crescent-shaped bed. In it, cedar of Lebanon—a dark presence—provides protection from the wind. The walkway along the water continues, past the Museum of Jewish Heritage and Robert F. Wagner Jr. Park and all the other public spaces that have been developed since South Cove opened. However, no other place in the development possesses such a rich and intriguing play of contrasts—water and land, natural and man-made, circular and straight, movement and stasis, positive and negative, continuity and disruption, past and present. It's a tiny park full of complexity.

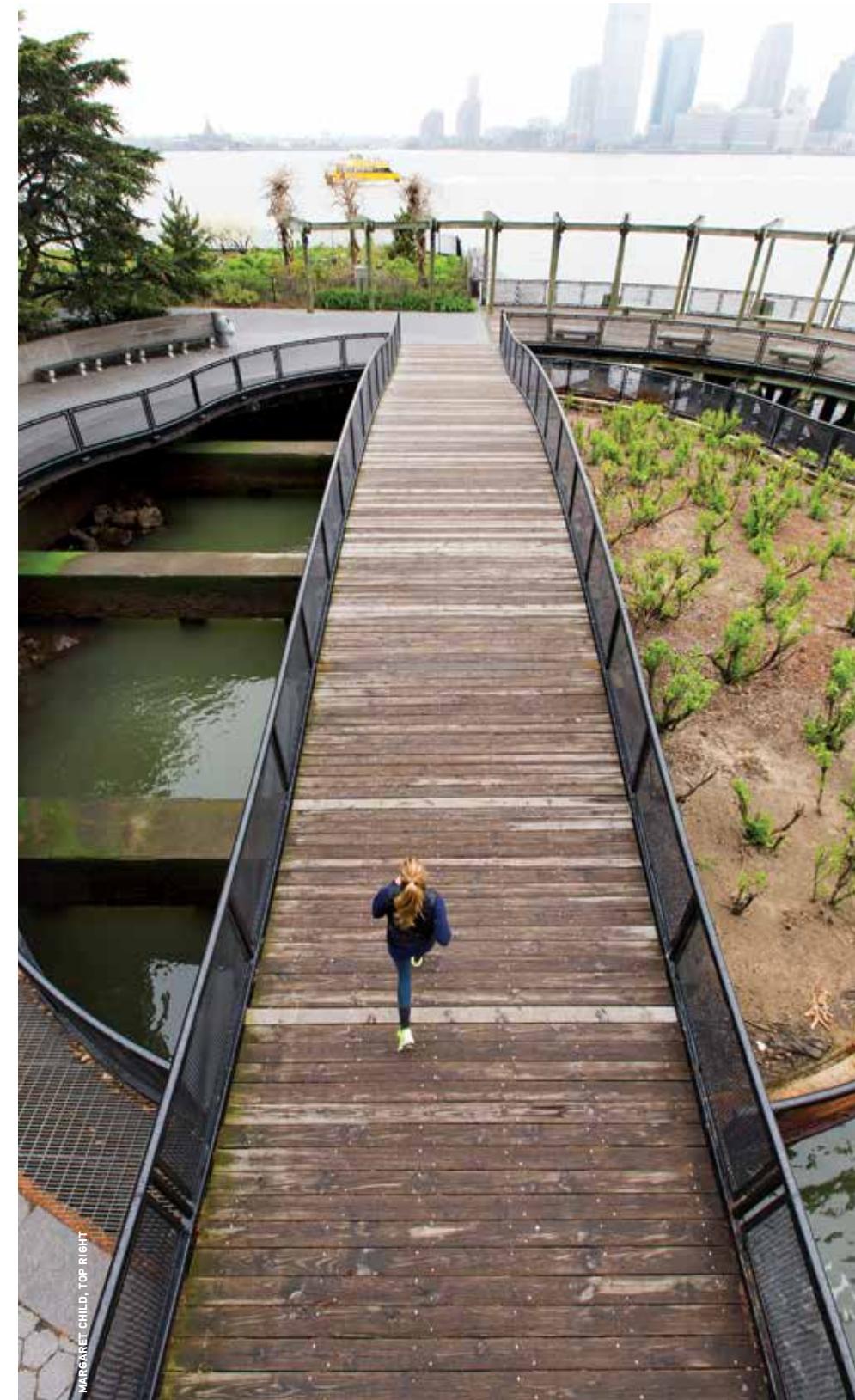
And, it turns out, a certain toughness.

On September 11, 2001, after terrorists flew their hijacked planes into the World Trade Center towers, South Cove played a role in the evacuation of Lower Manhattan. The railings were broken to aid in the exodus, as people streamed onto rescue boats. (The railings have since been fixed.)

In 2012, when Hurricane Sandy slammed into New York and brought extensive flooding to Lower Manhattan, Battery Park City, because of its elevation on landfill, fared better than areas farther inland. At South Cove, floodwaters submerged the

LEFT
The lookout tower also serves as a piece of freestanding sculpture.

OPPOSITE
The bridge arches over an island that was cut away on one side to reveal the concrete beams supporting the site's relieving platform.



MARGARET CHILD, TOP RIGHT



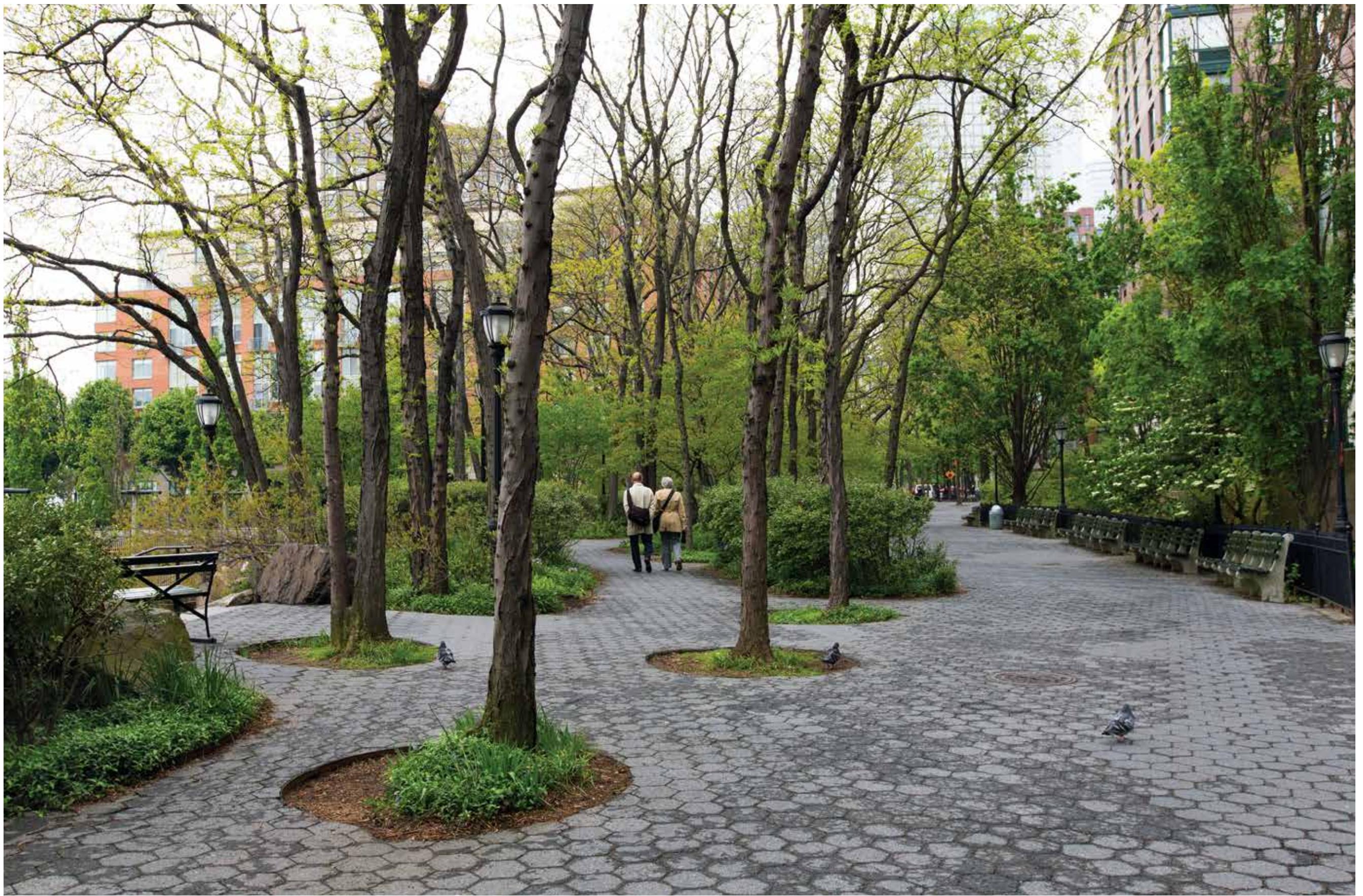
ABOVE
Susan Child, FASLA, in a photo taken in 2013.

boardwalk, the boulders, and the baccharis and came up as high as the grove, according to Fleisher.

But the site recovered quickly in the hands of the staff, which has always taken great care of Battery Park City's public spaces. Fleisher and his team replaced the soil that the water carried away, and they tinkered with the plantings, shifting to more salt-tolerant varieties. (They have also used non-toxic pesticides and organic fertilizers.) The pier at the northern edge of South Cove, damaged by wave action—and not just from Sandy—has been raised 12 inches. These are all sensible responses to evolving conditions on the site.

Other changes are more questionable, at least in the eyes of the designers.

"What's that?" Miss asked sharply, while we stood up in the tower peering down at the circular area surrounding the island. She'd noticed something new: a memorial marker, incorporated into the paving, depicting the Twin Towers; it was designed by staff of the New York City parks department and installed this past fall. On a nearby wall, there's an engraved plaque that says that "this oasis within an oasis" has been dedicated to honor the Battery Park City employees who



LEFT
Hexagonal pavers employed on Battery Park City's Esplanade were also used at South Cove.

assisted in the cleanup after the attack. Every year, on the anniversary of 9/11, the staff gathers at this spot in South Cove for a moment of silence at the exact time the planes hit. From this point it is possible to look up and see the new Freedom Tower.

"It's very tchotchke-like, very sad," Miss says when we approach the memorial addition. "Once this happens, the next person says they've got to put something in there, too."

Eckstut had this reaction: "Oh, it's the towers; that's terrible." Then he shrugged: "I subscribe to the idea of making a city a thing that evolves. What would worry me is if they'd made the whole area into a monument circle. I feel like we created a fabric that works. Then the world takes over."

Shari C. Hyman, the president and chief operating officer of the Battery Park City Authority, says of the new markers: "They don't disrupt from the serenity of South Cove." And indeed, she is right.

For their part, Reed and Child were dismayed to learn that the Statue of Liberty is no longer visible from South Cove's tower; the cedars of Lebanon have grown to the point where they now block the vista. "The trees need to be pruned," Reed says firmly. "You carve a window in the existing planting. The view of the statue was an important part of the design of the site and should be preserved."

Miss, on the other hand, recently named artist in residence at the New York City Department of Design and Construction, says the loss of that vista doesn't bother her. South Cove, which is officially listed on the Battery Park City books as a work of art, not a park, "was about the connection to the Hudson, to the water," she says. "It's its own place." •

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